

Summarized Interview with Robert “Bobby” Gibbs Whitmore

**Conducted by Nia King and Solenne Montgomery on March 6, 2021
for the West Springfield High School Applied History Program**

Mr. Robert “Bobby” Gibbs Whitmore, 62, was interviewed by Nia King and Solenne Montgomery on Saturday, March 6, 2021. Mr. Whitmore was born in 1959 in Montana, and was adopted by his parents, Virginia natives Robert L. Whitmore and Lillian Young. Mr. Whitmore was raised in Merrifield, Virginia, along with his sister, who was adopted. Bobby described his home as located near Lee Highway; his childhood residence address was 2811 Heartland Rd. Merrifield, VA. His mother got to rename the road "Heartland" because the county allowed the residents to rename the road due to Lee Highway expansion. Both of his parents had been born in Fairfax County, Virginia. Bobby remembers growing up in the house his father built, describing it as a "nice house" for his family, somewhat similar to the other houses built in the African American community in which his family lived. Growing up, his father was one of the first African American male carriers who delivered mail in the Falls Church area. His mother stayed at home until the children were school age then worked for the Federal Government at the Pentagon. He remembers growing up when Fairfax County was not yet a crowded suburban area; it was the country. In the warmer season, he remembers riding the neighbor's pony and playing games like basketball with cousins over the summer. When playing with the children in the neighborhood, he frequently remembers the children teasing him and calling him "white boy" because he was of a lighter skin complexion. He recalls getting what he referred to as "real snow" in the colder months; and would play in 16 to 20 inches of snow in the winter. During winter break, his mother's family would come over and celebrate Christmas with them. Bobby remembered Christmas as a large family affair when he was younger. Growing up Mr. Whitmore

was raised in a religious household, and each Sunday, he would attend the First Baptist Church of Merrifield, where his mother was a Sunday school teacher. Religion was a firm value taught in his household at a young age, and he still instills this value with him today.

Bobby's first experience with racism was when he was six years old and had to go to the hospital because he cut his hand on a light bulb. He remembered the experience as painful as the all-white staff sutured his hand up without providing any Novocain. He went to this hospital precisely because, at the time, no hospital hired people of color to their staff.

Mr. Whitmore attended Stenwood Elementary School in Vienna, an integrated school, for the first and second grades. He then transferred to integrated Shrevewood Elementary in Falls Church for the third and fourth grades due to educational issues. Mr. Whitmore then transferred and attended Leary Private School located in Falls Church, Virginia; for the fifth and sixth grades to help with his learning issues because, at the time, he did not know he had dyslexia. He realized his dyslexia and stated that "I did not read words; I read letters." Bobby remembered the hardships his parents had to go through to pay the tuition which allowed him to go to private school.

Once finishing up the sixth grade at a private school in the 70s, Bobby attended the newly integrated Luther Jackson Middle School in Falls Church, Virginia. Luther Jackson Middle School was originally the only high school African American students could attend in the Fairfax County area. Here he would encounter racial harassment as many black, and white students would continuously call him "white boy" instead of his name. Once school was out for the weekends, he remembers going to Tysons Corner with other young boys and riding dirt bikes. Bobby answered that this was a fun and exciting activity to do at the time. When graduating from

Luther Jackson Middle School, Mr. Whitmore then went to Oakton High School in Vienna, Virginia.

Bobby remembers the continuous racial hatred and discrimination in Fairfax County in high school, even though the schools had recently integrated. In his teenage years, he remembers the racial, economic disparities that were apparent in Fairfax County. Bobby remembers the economic disparity between the prosperous white flourishing communities and the middle to lower class black communities. Bobby also noticed many white students' parents could afford new cars for their children to drive. In contrast, many African- American students had to use public transportation or older cars to arrive at school. Bobby said he did not like attending high school or school in general due to the racial tension in Fairfax County. He remembers being called a "nigger" in high school by white students. Bobby said that having a white girlfriend did not make the harassment and racist remarks any better at school; it only worsened the remarks. Bobby also said that making friends in high school was too hard as the African-American students or white students did not accept him for who he was on the outside. Bobby favored gym and typewriting to bring joy to himself as he was good with his hands and excelled in those classes. In Bobby's junior year of high school, he got a job working for a construction company. Using the money he made, he bought his car and the car insurance.

After graduating from Oakton High School, his parents sold their house and moved. Bobby continued to live in Fairfax County after entering the workforce after high school. Here he continued to use his hands and worked in construction and also as a handyman. Once pool halls became popular within the Fairfax County area, he started to work assembling and fixing pool tables in pool halls and bars. He remembers going to one pool hall to fix a pool table, and someone told him that "his kind was not welcomed" he still stayed to assemble the pool table.

After a couple of years of staying in Fairfax County working, Mr. Whitmore ended up getting married to his first wife then divorced after 19 years. He then married his second wife at the Bull Run Battlefield in Manassas, Virginia. Bobby stated this was one of his best memories while living in Fairfax County because of the beautiful scenery at the battlefield.

When asked about memories that heavily impacted his life, Bobby responded with the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., he worried that he would be killed at the age of 9 because of his skin color and lived in fear at this time. He also remembers the riots after Martin Luther King Jr.'s death; buildings were set on fire, others were broken into and looted. He remembers the city of Washington D.C. and large cities being in racial unrest at the time. Mr. Whitmore also remembered a racial encounter he had to endure with Fairfax County police as a teenager. He remembers driving in his car and being pulled over by Fairfax County police; when pulled over, he remembers the racist and hateful speech the police told him they said they would "kick his ass." Bobby said that the encounter had been one memory that has impacted his life.

When asked about the changes he had seen in Fairfax County, Bobby talked about the changes happening because of Fairfax County politics. He stated newly elected officials on the local and state level have changed the political climate of once very Republican Fairfax County to now an ongoing Democratic county and state. He also said with the addition of federal government jobs added to the area has changed the area geographically and population. Bobby reveals that now Fairfax County is traffic-filled and constantly changing, which was way different when he was a kid. He also says the population is continuously increasing and bringing new diverse people from different countries. He says the increase of new and different people allows for a mix of people from all walks of life, making the area better for all, no matter their race. Bobby vocalized that within the past 10-20 years, the political climate has become more

critical in Virginia, especially Fairfax County. Bobby stated that he is not a super involved person in politics but likes the improved political environment of Fairfax County but misses the county's country aspect. Bobby plans to retire in Loudoun County after making enough money working in Fairfax County and then plans to move to the country, perhaps southern Virginia, where there is not too much traffic and life is simpler and slower.

When asked about what advice he would give to his grandchildren, he stated that he is a very Christian man and would instill God's teachings as his children's and grandchildren's values. He concluded the interview by saying, " you only live once, so make the fullest out of your life."



Stenwood Elementary



Mr. Bobby at Luther Jackson Middle School



First Baptist Church of Merrifield



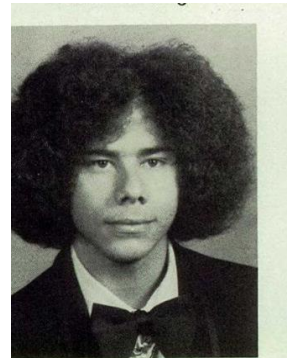
Shreveview Elementary



1972 Dirt Bike Track at Tysons



Oakton High School 9th Grade



Robert Whitmore

Oakton High School 12th grade



Oakton High School 10th grade

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